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COLLEGE STUDENTS AS THINKERS.

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IN February, 1905, the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW published an article entitled "Should College Students Study?" In this number I wish to consider another side of the intellectual relation of collegians: *thinking*.

Thinking and studying are intimately related. All studying represents, or should represent, thinking; but thinking may not represent studying. Thinking is far more subjective than studying. Thinking is the application of the mind to a problem, a condition, a situation. Reasoning, judging, weighing evidence, comparing, relating, inferring, are its products. It stands for intellectual initiative. Among its rules or principles are accuracy, thoroughness, and comprehensiveness. It represents mental investigation, searching, and sometimes discovery. It is the assessing of truth and fact at a just valuation. It is philosophy spinning out of the bowels of its brain an intellectual life. It is science finding a law in the observation and comparison of phenomena. It is analysis, the separation of complex and perplexing conditions. It is synthesis, putting together things which are related and putting them together as they are related. It is intellectual creativeness.

Thinking is work. It is hard work, if it be hard thinking. The hardness of the work bears a direct proportion to the hardness of the thinking. To such work the college man is summoned. The knowledge which the student gains, the facts which he acquires, the scholarship of which he becomes the master, rich as the results are, and advantageous as they may be, are of slight value in comparison with the worth of the power of thinking. Knowledge represents acquisitiveness; thinking, inquisi-

tiveness. Knowledge represents the storehouse; thinking, the engine. Knowledge stands for accumulation; thinking, for efficiency. Knowledge may, or may not, be power; thinking is, and always is, power. The man who knows represents the receiving, the piling up, and the hoarding of truths. The man who thinks represents intellectual activity, alertness, responsiveness.

There is some reason to believe that college men are becoming, as a class, less eager to undertake and to carry forward constantly and earnestly the labor of thinking. In undertaking any such interpretation of one's observations among college men of the present day, it is true, lies a peril of becoming a mere *laudator temporis acti*. But, after making proper deductions for such personal limitations, there does exist a feeling that students are not so willing to think as once they were. Such a belief is certainly wide-spread, and is held by some creditable witnesses.

In a paper recently read before the Schoolmasters' Association of New York and Vicinity on "The Mind of the Undergraduate," Professor George P. Baker, of Harvard, said:

"As I work with these undergraduates I am more and more surprised to find, not that they do not know how to think accurately, cogently (I suppose they would not be in classes in argumentation if they knew how to think well), but that many of them have no real interest in knowing how to think well. Many of them mean to enter the Law School and therefore wish training in debate. Many suspect that some day they will have to speak often in public and wish the requisite training. Far too many of both groups desire the end but care nothing for the means, the process by which it may best be attained. It is only by forcing, coaxing, that one can develop in these youths any interest in thinking for thinking's own sake, can make them appreciate the fact that there is a delicate pleasure in the process of thinking. . . . Clad in intellectual oilskins, he [the student] is almost blithesome in his absolute imperviousness to the ideas for which he is supposed to be taking the course."*

The testimony of Professor Baker is specially significant, both because of personal elements, and because of his rich opportunities of observation. About one hundred and fifty Harvard undergraduates come before him each year in the various courses on argumentation and public address.

But similar testimony is offered from other colleges than Harvard.

* "Educational Review," September, 1905, page 189.

A distinguished teacher at one of the more conspicuous historic institutions writes me, saying:

"I believe that the thinking power of students and their willingness to undertake hard tasks have distinctly lessened in the last ten years. The food the student now gets is poured into him 'predigested.' He no longer tears off, chews, masticates, and deglutinates his food,—he simply bolts it. It is often administered in sugar-coated pills, or gelatinous capsules. That is what the average student prefers, and therefore that is what he gets, since he must get what he wants. When, therefore, he is called upon for any of the sturdy old processes of mastery, he is apt to bolt or balk,—even the best of him. All this is just as true in Germany, as my friends there assured me, as in America. But there the '*Staatsexamen*' serves to moderate the evil."

Another teacher, also in an historic college, expresses the same conviction, and adds: "I have often spoken of this to my colleagues, and many, perhaps most of them, agree with me."

A teacher who, for thirty years, has been a beloved and efficient member of one of the smaller denominational, but efficient, colleges of the Central West, and who, in this time, has served as librarian, says:

"I have been librarian for thirty years and have had to do with the whole college. I have of necessity observed somewhat their [students'] mental habits. My opinion is that in library consultations an increasing number of students use library helps more and more, and do as little thinking as possible. They are frank in saying, 'I don't like this subject; there is so little reading upon it.' Again and again I say to them, 'It is a good theme. You can do your own thinking.' I am confirmed in this view by one of my colleagues of the Faculty, who has served on a committee to select questions for prize debates in one of our societies. He says the committee have chosen questions purposely that required thinking rather than reading, and have been criticised by the speakers for so doing."

"Their condition is fostered by two obvious things. The lecture system requires note-books and note-taking. In library work it has degenerated into literal copying from the open book. That process is constantly going on under the eyes of the librarian. Again, library helps have greatly multiplied in the last twenty-five years. They unlock everything and make the work easy for the searcher. They are invaluable to the advanced scholar who has learned to do his own thinking. But, like all sharp-edged tools, they are dangerous in the hands of the novice."

Conferences which I hold with college men in all parts, commonly, although not universally, lead to a similar conclusion.

Occasionally I hear the remark made that there is no deterioration in the intellectual power or work of students. Another expresses the conviction that any judgment touching any apparent deterioration arises from the change in the point of view of the one judging. A teacher of philosophy in a small but good college says: "I have never had better students than last year. I believe I require as much now as I ever did, and get as much done." Yet, such judgments are rather exceptional. The trend of conviction is that students are less inclined to think and less willing to undertake hard tasks than they formerly were. This conclusion is not by any means proved; but the evidence for the conclusion is such as to cause any one interested in American life or American education to become somewhat solicitous.

An inquiry into the causes of this condition,—if it exists,—bears one into both general and academic relations. The cause may reach back into the fitting school. But this cause also has relations to demands made by the college upon the fitting school. Most colleges build a high gateway of entrance. To open this gate represents a knowledge and a kind of knowledge which, in many respects, does not promote the gaining of thinking power. As Professor Baker has said:

"I sometimes wonder . . . whether it is possible that the colleges have set such rigid standards for the various entrance examinations that the schools must give all their time to cramming the boys for them, and cannot teach them to see the relation or bearing of one subject upon another. If, instead, the boy came up to college with fewer facts, but an interest in thinking for its own sake, respect for learning and literature, and some responsibility in citizenship, would not the gain be great? The schools now send him up with his mind like a desk with pigeonholes, some of them perhaps a trifle dusty, but undoubtedly with contents, yet not as a human being who has a relation to learning, literature and the facts of existence, and who is able and eager to make for himself applications of the ideas he has learned."*

Are not the colleges in peril of sacrificing the intellectual power of thinking to the intellectual power of gaining facts for the passing of examinations? There are, there have been, masters of fitting schools who made their boys thinkers. Samuel H. Taylor, of Andover, was of this type. He did not have a high place as fitting boys to pass well the examinations for admission to the Freshman class of Harvard College; but the train-

* "Educational Review," September, 1905, pages 198-9.

ing in thinking which he fostered did emerge in the exceptional intellectual power of men when they had entered the Junior or Senior year.

One cause, too, may be found in the increasing luxuriousness of academic life. The luxuriousness of academic life increases with the luxuriousness of life without college walls. Of the fact of the increase of luxury of both types there can be no manner of questioning. This condition is not to be anathematized, but for the present purpose only interpreted. A luxurious life is certainly, in many respects, to be preferred to a life bare and becoming barren. If bareness and limitation are in peril of producing cynicism, or moral ruthlessness, contempt of the civilities,—as they are,—so luxuriousness is in peril of producing in the student softness of intellectual and ethical fibre, flabbiness, indolence, and a preference of the passive graces to the active virtues. The use and enjoyment of material elegancies, the habit of luxuriousness, are consumptive of intellectual force which otherwise might be devoted to scholastic affairs.

It is not, moreover, for one instant to be questioned that the great interest of the undergraduates in athletic concerns does tend to draw away their interest from concerns directly intellectual. College talk is not, on the whole, intellectually stimulating, and the talk which prevails in the first two months of each academic year is very remote from intellectual stimulation. This talk concerns the great American football game. Professionalism,—if not of money, at least of method,—has come to prevail. For, as a conspicuous professor in a conspicuous college has written me:

“An athletic ‘career’ at one of our great universities now is essentially a professional career. A ‘husky’ young fellow may go through — on the strength of his athletic prowess, then come to Yale or Harvard and be carried through his University course on the strength of the same prowess, accumulating money as he goes, and then find some choice instructorship awaiting him in a great preparatory school,— . . . ,—and then the vicious circle is complete, and he trains up other ‘husky’ fellows to come to the Universities and to do just what he has done. But such men are not amateurs, they are professionals, as I hold, reaping pecuniary reward all the time for their athletic proficiency, and reaching a proficiency far beyond the reach of any one who is not ready to make a profession out of his athletics. They get a

magnificent training, I do not for a moment doubt that, a training which our other professional schools may well envy for its minute thoroughness and its fine perfection of the best traditions, but the training is not along scholarly lines. I believe that Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Pennsylvania, and other large universities, now furnish and maintain, with the assistance of a paying public, large and thorough professional schools of athletics."

Under such a condition, intellectual fires burn low on the altars of scholarship and of thoughtfulness.

Another cause may lie in the use, amounting to an abuse, made of the elective system of studies. The advantages offered through the elective system are very great. The introduction of this system was inevitable. The inevitableness of its introduction arose from the vast enlargement of the field of knowledge. But, despite its inevitableness and its great advantages, disadvantages do accompany its use. Among the advantages, be it said, is the promotion of scholarship. It has lifted scholastic standards. It has permitted the development of departments of study beyond the elements of a subject. It has promoted the growth of individuality in personal character, as well as in scholarship. But, under this very condition, it has also allowed the development of character through less strenuous subjects and methods unto less worthy results. It has suffered the student to make for himself a curriculum through which he is not obliged to run, but may dawdle and amble. If, for certain men, it has promoted strenuousness, in others it has promoted softness. If it has allowed not a few men to make the most of themselves, and far more than they could under any other system, it has also allowed a few, at least, to make the less of themselves. Yet it might be affirmed that it is better for a man to select for himself a soft course, rather than to suffer the imposition of a hard course against which he would rebel. For, as a great English bishop said, "It is better for every man in England to go home drunk to-night, than for any man in England to have the right taken away of going home drunk." Intellectual rebellion is intellectual suicide. But this, at least, is clear, that for some men the effect of an easy-going system results in a neglect of the intellectual severities and virilities.

A fifth cause of the condition emerges. The entering into the college of men who propose, upon leaving college, to go into

business has been the occasion of congratulation for both the commercial and the academic world. The reflex action, however, of the presence in the college of many men who propose to follow commercial or industrial pursuits needs to be considered well. Such men usually go to college for general reasons. Such men, also, represent a high social type and are also of more than average financial ability. They go to college because of their desire for the touch of college life. Specific reasons sometimes also influence. Associations formed in college, they are inclined to believe, may open good business opportunities. Domestic or social conditions frequently prompt to the entering into academic relations. But it is clear that the scholastic impulse, or the scholarly motive, is not primary. Intellectual purposes do not dominate. Executive functions, undergraduate undertakings,—athletic, literary, social,—are regarded as securing the purpose of going to college quite as completely as hard reading or hard thinking. “It is too bad to ask these men to study Greek,” said one of my friends, a distinguished professor of Greek in an historic college, “they have too much to do.” The conclusion is necessary. Such men are not naturally or usually interested in hard and high thinking.

I am also inclined to believe that the transfer of interest on the part of the teacher from the personality of the student to truth may promote the result of the student's neglecting the duty of thinking. The teachers of the earlier time were feeble enough in all respects. They knew little of truth. They were not scholars. Their regard for the student, also, was certainly not too great, great as in many instances it was. The teachers of the present time possess an equipment in knowledge far superior to that possessed by the teacher of the earlier period. But their interest in the students is, on the whole, not so constant, not so definite. They are more inclined to regard their work as finished at the close of the recitation or of the lecture. They are in peril of neglecting what some regard as a duty,—the aiding of the individual student. For such a result they are not to be blamed. The increasing size of classes, the elaborateness of living, the augmentation of executive work, the opportunity of research, represent functions which, not a few of them worthily hold, are more important than the concern for the individual man. But, at all events, the individual student,

as a thinking and moral being, is in peril of suffering. He does not grow. In many instances, he does suffer.

One may ask the question, What is to be done? It is something to know that a peril exists. The knowledge of its existence is the first condition for its removal. The Anglo-Saxon man, too,—even if he be the college man,—has the primary power of self-correction.

It is important, moreover, for college teachers to promote the pursuit on the part of their students of such subjects as, in their inherent character, demand thinking, and also to promote such a pursuit of these subjects as does promote thinking. Mathematics is a subject which demands thinking. It is thinking; it is nothing else. History may be presented as a matter of acquisition; it also may be presented as a matter of weighing evidence, as a study of cause and effect. Economics is a subject which specially offers opportunities for such study as develops thinking. Its phenomena are complex, and the causes which prevail in its field are often obscure. These studies, and similar ones, offer a special advantage in creating and nourishing the power of thinking.

It also should be borne in mind that, in the loyalty for the elective system of studies, there is to be loyalty to a system of *study*. Studies may be elective; study is not. If the student will not study, he is to be excluded from the place of study. The community is demanding that the college man shall "make good." The community suffers a sense of disgust at academic laziness. The community is becoming impatient, not only of tomfoolery, of horse-play and of nonsense, but also of inefficiency. The community demands that the college man shall work at his job, and the community realizes that the most important part of his job is to think. Can college officers do better than to seek to meet the righteous demand of the community that students shall attend to the great business of thinking?

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